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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an assessment of interpersonal power in a sample of college-age dating couples using both self-report and behavioral measures. While self-reports revealed egalitarian ideals, less than half the respondents perceived their current relationship as egalitarian in practice; rather, these relationships tended to be male-dominated. Behavioral measures of outcome power based on joint discussions by each couple aslo indicated slight male dominance. Interestingly, the sexes differed in verbal styles used to achieve power. Males rated as powerful by outside observers proposed more opinions and facts than their partners, whereas females rated as powerful opposed and questioned their partners. Little correlation was found between different measures of power, a result which agrees with other research on power and suggests that power ideals, perceptions, outcomes, and styles are distinct domains of a multi-dimensional concept. (Author)

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The Assertion of Power: Ideals, Perceptions, and Styles*

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I would like to begin my talk about our data on power with a passage from a recent autobiography, A Mingled Yarn, by Beulah Parker:

> Grandmother had only to express the slightest wish, and Grandfather would jump to fulfill her whim. His image as a mighty man was never disturbed by a word or a hint from Grandmother, but one couldn't help seeing that he wasn't really the boss in his own home, no matter how powerful he was in the business world, and even as a small child I wondered why. Once, I remember, she wanted to go on a cruise around the world. She never said so openly, but pretty soon little travel folders appeared on the library table, and then one day Grandfather said, "I've always wanted to go around the world. Why don't we go this Spring?" And Grandmother was delighted, just as though he had dreamed it all up by himself.[1]

This passage highlights several of the issues we chose to examine in our study: the ideals or values that people hold about power, the perception of actual power in a relationship, and the style by which one person is able to influence another. The writer, a woman, is aware of the ideal of male superiority which Grandmother had to uphold. But within this value system, she obviously perceives Grandmother's actual power, and is both amused and amazed at the extent of Grandmother's influence. It is also quite clear that the style by which Grandmother achieves her ends is indirect. Her methods are expressly designed not to challenge the ideal of "Grandfather's image as a mighty man," or the assumption of male superiority. And Grandmother seems quite content about that.

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* The research described in this paper is part of a longitudinal study of dating couples conducted at Harvard University under the direction of Zick Rubin. The longitudinal study will be described in full in Rubin, Z., Peplau, A., and Hill, C., forthcoming.

1 Parker, Beulah. A Mingled Yarn. Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1972, p. 66.

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Today, with the advent of the Women's Movement, both males and females have become more aware of the traditional inequalities in status which underlie the relationships between the sexes. Ideals appear to have shifted in the direction of equality in interpersonal relationships, but the extent to which these shifts have affected people's perceptions about their relationships or their actual behavior with their partner remains an open question.

Our study of power in dating couples employed two basic methodologies: self-report and behavioral assessment. The self-reports measured both partners' power ideals and their perceptions of the power balance in their current relationship through the use of attitudinal questionnaires.[2] For the behavioral assessment, I selected sixty couples from the larger sample to participate in a session during which they discussed hypothetical cases about dating relationships and resolved their different opinions into a joint answer. Both outcome and process measures of power were derived from this sample of behavior. These two methods, self-report and behavioral assessment, correspond to two different approaches to the study of power: the "inside" and "outside" perspectives, as described by Olson (1974) and Olson and Cromwell (1975). These researchers view the "inside" and "outside" perspectives as reflecting conceptually distinct domains of the multi-dimensional concept we refer to as power. They point out that in numerous past studies, findings using these two methods have not been empirically correlated. As part of our study, we wished to explore the empirical relationships between the inside and outside perspectives on power in our sample of couples.

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[2] The analysis of the questionnaire data on power was carried out by Anne Peplau. An expanded version of her findings will appear in: Rubin, Z., Peplau, A., and Hill, C., forthcoming.

[3] The behavioral assessment of power was carried out as part of my doctoral dissertation, "The Exercise of Power in Dating Couples," Harvard University, 1975.

Today I will first discuss the self-report data on power ideals and the perception of power. Then I will turn to the findings from the behavioral session. In our attitudinal questionnaire, we assessed power ideals with the global question: "Who do you personally think ought to have more of a say about what you and (____) do together, (____) or you?" Answer choices were given along a 5-point scale ranging from "(____) ought to have much more of a say" through "We both ought to have exactly the same amoung of say" to "I ought to have much more of a say." We found that in terms of ideals, our participants were strong supporters of an egalitarian relationship. Ninety-five per cent of the women and 87% of the men indicated that both the boyfriend and the girlfriend should have exactly equal say in their relationship.

Each member's perception of the actual balance of power in their current relationship was assessed with a second global question: "Who do you think has more of a say about what you and (____) do together, (____) or you?" Once again, answer choices ranged along a 5-point scale from "(____) has much more of a say" through "We both have exactly the same amount of say" to "I have much more of a say." We found that despite their egalitarian ideals, only 49% of the females and 42% of the males perceived their current relationship as equal in power. When the relationship was unequal, it was more than twice as likely that the male was perceived as more powerful than the female.

In addition to these two global questions, two four-item scales were created. The Situational Power Scale assessed each partner's perception of the power balance in four specific areas of the relationship: recreational, sexual, activities with others, and time. The Hypothetical Power Scale assessed each partner's perception of the power balance in four

hypothetical decision-making situations. Both scales were significantly correlated with the second global question assessing the perception of actual power, thus serving as a validation of that relatively simple and economical measure.

We were curious about the discrepancy between the egalitarian ideals held by these couples and their non-egalitarian perceptions of the actual power balance in their relationships. In order to investigate this discrepancy, we next explored several factors which we thought might help to explain the distribution of perceived power found in our couples. One thing that we discovered was that most of our sample did not grow up in an egalitarian family. Only 18% reported that their parents' relationship was egalitarian; 53% said that their father had been dominant, and 29% said that their mother had been dominant. Thus, many of these students are seeking a new power balance in their own relationships; one which has not been modeled in their family.

A cluster of related attitudes and behaviors also helps to explain the variation in the perception of power across couples. This cluster includes sex-role attitudes, relative involvement in the relationship, and women's educational plans. Sex-role attitudes were assessed using a Sex-role Traditionalism scale, made up of ten items such as "It's just as appropriate for a woman to open a door for a man as vice versa," and "When a couple is going somewhere by car, it's better for the man to do most of the driving." More males and females with traditional sex-role attitudes reported male dominance in their relationships (about 50%) than did those with more liberal sex-role attitudes (about 25%). In terms of relative involvement, we found that when the male was less involved, most of the

couples reported male dominance (about 70%); when the female was less involved, about half of the couples reported female dominance. When we looked at the female's educational plans, we found that much more male dominance was perceived by both males and females when the woman's educational plans were limited to either high school or a B.A. degree. When the woman aspired to a graduate degree, a more equal relationship was reported. This effect did not hold for the male's educational plans. These findings on sex-role attitudes, relative involvement, and women's educational plans appear to be related. High educational aspirations on the part of women might be viewed as a concrete measure of non-traditional sex-role attitudes. Women with such non-traditional attitudes are also likely to be less involved in a dating relationship than more traditional women, and hence to be more dominant in the relationship. Men's educational plans do not correspond to sex-role attitudes and relative involvement in the same way.

I will now turn to the behavioral assessment of power, where each couple engaged in a variety of decision-making tasks, the most important of which was their joint discussion of hypothetical cases about dating relationships. The cases were created by modifying the Inventory of Marital Conflicts developed by Olson and Ryder (1970). In these cases, one partner received the male point of view and the other, the female point of view. The two points of view were somewhat discrepant in order to create a conflict between the partners, and they were told of this discrepancy in advance. For example, on Case #1, entitled "Late for a Date," the male received this version of the event, which highlights his point of view:

(M) 1. Mark and Sally have been invited out for dinner at 7 p.m. by a married friend of Sally's. Mark has been at a meeting and fails to realize how late it is. When he arrives half an hour late to pick Sally up, she is furious, blowing up the issue beyond all proportion by calling his lateness an insult to her and their hosts. Mark feels badly about being late, but doesn't think it is important enough to merit such an outburst from Sally.

The female received this version, highlighting her point of view:

(F) 1. Mark and Sally have been invited out for dinner at 7 p.m. by a married friend of Sally's. When Mark has not arrived by 7:15 to pick her up, Sally becomes annoyed. She sees his lateness as both an insult to her and a sign of inconsideration to their hosts. When he finally appears 15 minutes later, saying he was detained at a meeting and making light of his lateness, she becomes really angry and a heated argument ensues.

The couples were asked to discuss eight such cases with the interviewer out of the room and to resolve their disagreements as to whose position was most justified, the boyfriend's or the girlfriend's, into a joint answer.

For each case, I noted which partner's initial opinion became the joint decision of the couple. This provided a measure of verbal influence in the couple. The total number of cases each partner "won" through verbal influence became the measure of <u>outcome</u> power. In our sample, the males were found to have very slightly more outcome power in six of the eight cases, but the sex difference was statistically significant in only one case. In other words, outcome power was nearly equal on this task. The result was the same in two other smaller decision-making tasks: deciding on an activity to do together, and deciding who would make an important future decision for the couple. The males had very slightly more power than the females in each of these decisions, but the sex difference was not statistically significant.

In order to evaluate the relationship between self-report and behavioral

measures of power, as discussed above, I correlated the four self-report measures of power from the questionnaire (the two global questions and the two four-item scales) with the outcome measures from the three decision-making tasks. No significant relationships were found between any of the self-report and behavioral measures. While considerable male dominance emerged in the self-reports, the behavioral outcome in these couples was more nearly equal. This finding confirms Olson and Cromwell's point that self-report and behavioral perspectives on power are conceptually distinct, and that discrepancies are to be expected between them. The discrepancy in our measures may be due in part to perceptual bias based on the feeling that male dominance is still considered more socially desirable to report than is egalitarianism, especially in more traditional couples.

I was also curious about the kinds of verbal styles used by males and females to achieve influence. The description of Grandmother and Grandfather with which I began this talk suggests that traditionally, women could be quite influential as long as they did not openly challenge the public image of male dominance. As Jessie Bernard points out in The Future of Marriage (1972), traditionally, women, unlike men, had to exercise power behind the scenes by being devious and dissembling. Empirical research by Kenkel (1957) was consistent with Bernard's description. Using Bales' Interaction Process Analysis system (1950), he showed that powerful women tended to make positive socio-emotional statements to support and mollify their partner, whereas powerful men made more instrumental, task-oriented statements. I wondered whether such a pattern would hold true for our sample.

In order to investigate this area, two outside observers, one male and one female, were asked to listen to the tape-recorded case discussions

and to rate who they thought had the most power, the male or the female partner. The observers then listened to the first two case discussions again and coded them into twelve process categories based on Bales' IPA system. These twelve categories were later combined into four clusters labeled Placate, Propose, Request, and Oppose. Placate and Oppose correspond roughly to Bales' positive and negative socio-emotional categories. Propose and Request correspond to Bales' instrumental categories.

Interestingly, I found that the pattern of gaining influence by raising the other person's status as described by Bernard and Kenkel was not upheld in our sample. The females viewed as powerful did not Placate by making emotional appeals, complying, and agreeing with their partner. Rather, females viewed as powerful used a high proportion of either the Request or Oppose clusters. These females tended to ask their partner for information, opinion, and structural orientation to the discussion. They also opposed the information and opinions offered by their partners, and attacked their partners more. Their use of the Request and Oppose categories corresponds to Bales' instrumental and negative socio-emotional categories respectively. This finding suggests that in the two decades since Kenkel's research, women viewed as powerful may have become freer to employ instrumental strategies and to use negativism to achieve their ends. They are no longer confined to the appeasing, placating role. Males viewed as powerful behaved in a different way. They used a high proportion of the Propose cluster, and tended to make statements giving structure to the discussion, giving information about the cases, and expressing opinions to their partners.

Despite the shift that women appear to be making away from socio-emotional expression and towards more instrumental strategies of influence, the assertive style used by women in our sample is still somewhat indirect.

Mishler (1975) points out that there is a status ambiguity in the use of questioning as a verbal style because it is not clear whether the question is actually a plea or a challenge. The women's use of questioning suggests that while instrumentality has become increasingly sex-role appropriate, direct assertion by proposing ideas or stating opinions is still not a power strategy of choice for women when interacting with men.

Another possible interpretation for these findings must be entertained, however. The above correlations between rated power and verbal style might reflect the observers' stereotypes of powerful males and females rather than the actual power of these partners. If this is the case, then the finding that both the male and female observer held the same stereotypes of powerful males and females is of interest. This latter interpretation receives some substantiation from the fact that the observers' ratings of power did not significantly correlate with the outcome power measures. This lack of correspondence in measures is yet another example of the discrepancy in perspective discussed by Olson and Cromwell.

In summary, I would like to emphasize that this study is based on a very small sample of behavior analyzed in a global manner. Hence the findings should be viewed as suggestive rather than definitive. It is hoped that future studies will improve on these findings by developing more fine-grained methods of analysis and using them in a variety of settings. The present results suggest that there have been significant changes in the ways that women influence others since Grandmother's day. The women in our sample did not have to resort to placating and appeasing to achieve their ends. But they were still not comfortable proposing their ideas and opinions directly. The influential women in our sample used frequent questioning,

a verbal style that is indirect, even though effective. They also guided the course of the discussion by opposing the information and opinions proffered by their partners. It thus appears that the traditional notion that the male "proposes" and the female "opposes" still prevails today in the discussions of dating couples.

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